

Strategies for growth in emerging clusters

At the outset of the current Five Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice called “upon the community of the Most Great Name ... to raise over the next five years the total number of clusters in which a programme of growth is under way, at whatever level of intensity, to 5,000, approximately one third of all clusters in the world at present.”¹ Some three years later, the Bahá’ís of the world had already established 3,000. With 2,000 clusters remaining of the goal, the Universal House of Justice observed in its Riḍván 2014 message that, in the last two years of the Plan, “the critical tasks of strengthening existing programmes of growth and beginning new ones urgently beckon.”²

Individuals, communities, and institutions around the world are learning how to set in motion a process that attends to the spiritual and material needs of a population, and reflecting on how this burgeoning capacity can be further nurtured. This edition of *Reflections on Growth* shares experiences about how a cluster can begin its movement towards the first milestone, where core activities are sustained “by those progressing through the sequence of institute courses and committed to the vision of individual and collective transformation they foster.”³

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Drawing on the assistance of friends acting as travelling teachers and homefront pioneers:

*There are numerous examples of individuals who, having gained practical experience in contributing to the material and spiritual transformation of their own community, arise and serve in other clusters. “The successful prosecution of the Plan”, the Universal House of Justice stated in its message dated 23 May 2011 to the Bahá’ís of the world, “will require the services of ... consecrated souls who, spurred on by their love for the Blessed Beauty, will forsake their homes to settle in villages, towns and cities in order to raise to 5,000 the number of clusters with programmes of growth.”*⁴

Togo

A community can invigorate its activities by drawing on the assistance of tutors from other localities. The following account shares an example of how these “mobile tutors” were trained, and how the emerging clusters were encouraged to assume ownership of the institute process.

The majority of the new programmes of growth in Togo have been established with the help of a mobile tutor. Before a mobile tutor is deployed, the institutions prepare the community in two significant ways: by facilitating study of guidance from the Universal House of Justice, and by assisting the community members to arrange room and board for the visitor.

Over a few visits, Auxiliary Board members shared extracts from recent guidance of the House of Justice conveying the vision of the training institute and the importance of community-building activities. This conversation happened with members of the community and in some cases with the Local Spiritual Assembly. Along with arranging room and board, the friends were encouraged to look for potential participants for the institute courses and to identify the most suitable location and time to hold the sessions.

Equally important to the work carried out in a community before the arrival of the mobile tutor were the efforts of the training institute to prepare individuals to serve as tutors. This often took the form of refresher courses for materials of the institute. The mobile tutor became part of the daily lives of the friends in the community, staying in the homes of local friends who offered to host them. Because of the strong bonds of friendship that were nurtured, community members looked forward to future visits.

Several clusters throughout Togo have used the approach described above. One example is **Cinkassé**, a semi-urban cluster bordering Burkina Faso.

One year ago in Cinkassé, 4 people had completed Ruhi Book 1, and 4 devotional meetings were being held with about 25 attending, more than half of whom were friends of the Faith. A mobile tutor visited, trained 6 people in the village of Nadjoundi in Book 1, and helped them start a few more devotional meetings. In time, this group of 6 swelled to 15 as more friends eagerly accepted the invitation to study courses of the institute and to contribute to the well-being of their community.

When the regional coordinator and the mobile tutor visited next, they facilitated Book 1 with 9 new friends who had been invited since the first visit of the mobile tutor. The expanded group then split into two, with one studying Book 5 and the other studying Book 3 with the help of a second mobile tutor. The friends organized in pairs to conduct junior youth groups and children's classes.

In the past year, devotional meetings have more than doubled to 10 gatherings with 50 participants. There are now 4 children's classes and 3 junior youth groups, with 50 and 36 participants respectively. To further unite the members of this nascent community, deepenings are planned on the significance of the Nineteen Day Feast and Holy Day celebrations.

The friends in Cinkassé have gained valuable experience in fostering a devotional spirit in a community and attending to the spiritual education of children and younger youth.

Italy

A small community of adult Bahá'ís was able, with the help of some travelling teachers, to start a junior youth group and a study circle, and to reach out to a receptive population in the wider community. The friends soon learned that the younger ones needed the support of the adults, and the youth were highly encouraged when they recognized the confidence and trust that the adults had in them.

The city of **Cosenza** in southern Italy was opened to the Faith by a pioneer some decades ago. When she passed away, she left her apartment to the Bahá'í community. At first, the National Spiritual Assembly considered selling the house and donating the proceeds to the Bahá'í Fund. After more prayers and consultation, however, the local community requested to keep the property and turn it into a Bahá'í Centre, using it for community-building activities. The National Assembly agreed, and the decision triggered a new spirit in the hearts of the few believers in that town.

One night, a local believer, in consultation with two travelling teachers, decided to call on some close friends to begin a conversation about walking a path of service. Four young friends attended an initial meeting to explore the importance of offering service to the

rising generations, the role of youth in the process of change, and the present condition of humanity. These friends were struck by the invitation of the local Bahá'í community to work together to promote change in the city. They enthusiastically expressed their wish to serve as animators of junior youth groups.

The community consulted about how to respond to this opportunity, and some adults decided to facilitate a study of Ruhi Book 1 for these new friends. Meanwhile, the travelling teachers continued to offer support to the community, nurturing friendships and taking turns to visit the cluster regularly. Within six months, a group of Bahá'í youth, their friends, and some adults completed study of Books 1 and 5. When the study of Book 5 concluded, the community held a meeting and planned its next steps.

A decision was made to offer the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme to an organization that provides after-school activities for young Roma. The organization responded positively, and a new relationship began. The travelling teachers continued to visit—one even staying for two months—and with encouragement the first junior youth group was formed. At about the same time, the enthusiasm of those involved attracted others who wished to study the main sequence of institute courses. Within a short span of time, this group has studied the first books of the sequence and is learning how to approach others in the community's schools.

Canada

The series of 114 youth conferences—welcoming a broad array of participants including high school students, young professionals, and married couples—galvanized thousands of souls to dedicate themselves to the betterment of society. The study materials prepared for these historic gatherings explored themes such as the development of a culture of mutual support and the contribution that each person can make to the advancement of civilization. The desire sparked in many attendees to return home and serve their communities was supported by teams of travelling teachers:

A young indigenous Innu couple, who have a baby, have been actively serving the Faith in the Innu community of Uashat, in the **Côte Nord** cluster in Quebec. Some years ago, the husband completed some institute courses, including Ruhi Book 5. He attended the Montreal youth conference, which had a profound effect on him. There, he made many new friends, including those from remote places in northern Canada and young Bahá'ís serving in Montreal.

The husband made plans at the conference to start a junior youth group in his own community and had the support of friends he met in Montreal. He spent time in Montreal after the conference assisting with a junior youth group there. A few months later, a team of two friends went to visit him and his family. Together they started the first junior youth group in Uashat with 5 Innu participants.

In January, the two friends from Montreal, along with an Auxiliary Board member, visited the community again for several days. During one of many home visits, someone expressed the desire to start a devotional meeting. A few community gatherings took place—one with 20 people—and the community felt a sense of commitment to support the junior youth group. The Colombia segment of the film *Frontiers of Learning* was shown, and the friends shared some quiet and profound reflections after watching it.

During the team's time there, many spoke of hope for their children and junior youth, and some gave support to the group in a variety of ways. The team from Montreal is prepared to make monthly visits to Uashat, staying for a week each time to support their friends in efforts to create an environment where all can become active agents of their own learning.

The friends in Uashat feel that the new junior youth group is a ray of light. More recently, a children's class has started. The cluster is making its way towards the first milestone. There is now a trained Innu animator of the junior youth group who is well known and widely respected by the wider community of Uashat.

Peru

A homefront pioneer, collaborating with some local youth, established deep bonds of friendship and trust with families as well as members of the local government in a community in northern Peru. Over time, more members of the community joined the pioneer and the team of young friends to reach out to more and more people.

The **Sullana** cluster, in the Piura region of northern Peru, moved from having no activities to passing the first milestone in just four months. The process began with the arrival of a pioneer who, with one of the local youth, encouraged friends in the community to attend the youth conference in Lima. A group of 11 attended the gathering and returned with inspiration, enthusiasm, and a desire to serve their community. Before and after the conference, however, parents and local religious leaders feared that the activities would be a distraction from school work and their own religious activities.

With the help of the pioneer, the youth held a meeting with representatives of the local government to share their experience at the youth conference. A room at the school was made available and about 30 people came. With encouragement from the lieutenant governor, some decided to participate in study circles and junior youth groups. A meeting was organized for the parents, and those who attended became eager and gave permission for their children to participate, even opening their homes for activities.

To build on this experience, a regular meeting was scheduled to study the five themes of the youth conference materials and for some to begin studying the main sequence of courses. Some in the group soon began studying Ruhi Book 1, while others continued with the conference materials.

After a series of crises and victories, including overcoming the reluctance of some of the parents to allow their children to participate, a two-week intensive institute course was organized in the community. Invitations to the first day were sent to the authorities, with support from the son of the lieutenant governor. Parents were visited one by one and personally invited to attend.

When the intensive training began, very few people came. The homefront pioneer and local friends sought permission and support from the schools to visit every class to speak with the students about social and spiritual transformation. As a result, 18 youth came to the training, and they soon started the first junior youth group. The participants wished to continue their training beyond the two weeks, and the pioneer continued to facilitate the courses. In time, two more junior youth groups and one children's class were formed. The youth also started a service project, which helped demonstrate to the parents how the training could put high ideals into action through service to others.

Recently, a community event was organized to present the training institute and its activities to everyone in the village, and over 80 people attended. In the meeting, some suggested that the local community could donate land to provide a space for the institute. The lieutenant governor shared that the educational process has made a significant change in the youth.

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Learning how to work with an expanding nucleus of friends: Community-building efforts in a village or neighbourhood may at first involve a small core group of friends. Over time, however, more and more people—“men and women eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings”⁵—acquire a greater sense of ownership for processes that are unfolding in their communities. What gradually emerges is a rhythm of community life “commensurate with the capacity of an expanding nucleus of individuals committed to Bahá’u’lláh’s vision of a new World Order”⁶.

South Africa

Until a year ago, the **Swartland** cluster had a group of about ten youth engaged in core activities, but the group was not expanding. Eventually, with the help of a pioneer from Cape Town, concrete steps were taken to expand the group in the hopes of starting a programme of growth.

At first, many new friends were attracted by the arts and singing in the group. But later, conversations focused on how, in addition to using the power of the arts, youth can contribute to the well-being of their community by serving those who are younger than them.

The group became more determined, particularly after the youth conference, to foster a sense of purpose in the young people of their community. The group had conversations with parents about the forces affecting their children and how they could support the efforts of the junior youth. As a result, the parents have not only supported the groups but joined a regular devotional meeting organized by the youth; some have even studied institute courses and started children’s classes. So far, five of the youth have enrolled in the Faith, and there are now six children’s classes, two junior youth groups, two study circles, and one devotional meeting under way.

The Regional Bahá’í Council and regional coordinator are now making efforts to share what has been learned from the experience with friends in nearby clusters where programmes of growth have yet to start.

Australia

Some months ago, Auxiliary Board members—in consultation with the Regional Bahá’í Council—met with a few friends and various Local Spiritual Assemblies to consult on how a programme of growth could be started in the **North East Victoria** cluster. With the help of a regional team, a growing group of friends became involved and the cluster has now moved beyond the first milestone.

Early on, a neighbourhood in the North East Victoria cluster was identified as receptive to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. A team visited a resident Bahá'í family with children to study relevant guidance on initiating a programme of growth. Soon after, the family opened its home for a group to study institute courses with the support of friends from the Melbourne cluster. As part of their study, the group met neighbours and introduced them to the educational process associated with the training institute, often inviting the new friends to the home of the Bahá'í family.

After a few cycles of activity, one junior youth group, one children's class, and one study circle had started. These were complemented by a devotional gathering held in a nearby community. Although the vision of the group initially focused on the junior youth programme, it soon broadened to include other community-building activities. The group realized that there was great need for and receptivity to classes offered for the spiritual education of children.

Systematically inviting friends from the local population to participate in core activities has become part of the regular rhythm of the cluster. A focus on understanding the nature and purpose of the institute process and engaging everyone in the cluster through regular home visits has increased participation—both at reflection meetings and in institute courses. Youth and adults are moving through courses of the institute and learning how to carry out acts of service, in both centralized courses and in study circles throughout the cluster.

A key factor influencing growth in this community has been unity. Having faith in one another's capacity, persevering through challenges, and ensuring that they regularly study the Sacred Writings and the guidance of the Universal House of Justice has bound the friends together. The effective use of reflection spaces has also helped growth.

A cluster reflection meeting now takes place every three months. Each time the friends plan a gathering, they ask for volunteers to organize its different aspects. This way everyone feels encouraged to take ownership of the process of growth in the cluster. The gathering has allowed the friends to meet regularly and consult on a few simple questions about service—particularly how the friends would like to serve their community. One of the questions asked, for example, was whether anyone would like to help with the spiritual education of children. Focus on service has led more people to study Ruhi Book 1, and at the following reflection meeting, new participants shared that it gave them a deeper understanding of service and a desire to contribute to the Plan.

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***Developing the capacity to share experiences and resources between clusters:** Friends in clusters with existing programmes of growth are coming together to identify how they can help neighbouring communities to draw on the spiritual forces released by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.*

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Mbuji-Mayi is the third largest city in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Bahá'í community has been strengthening an intensive programme of growth for nearly a decade. Recently, the friends in Mbuji-Mayi decided, after reflecting on progress in the nearby **Tshilenge** cluster—which already had a few activities and two tutors and had been identified as being

receptive—to send an experienced teacher of the Faith to support the efforts of the two local tutors.

After consulting, the 3 friends decided to plan a teaching campaign, which led to 46 declarations. Asking what needed to be learned next and what actions were required, the group decided to carry out home visits to deepen new believers and to help them participate in the Nineteen Day Feast and Holy Day programmes.

Consultation then focused on creating a sense of community life, which was important for the growing community. They decided to have a devotional meeting every Friday, which has been regularly attended by about 50 people. Rather than seeing the consolidation phase only as a set of activities to deepen new believers, the friends used it to develop a stronger sense of community.

These 3 friends met each weekend to evaluate the process and make new plans. By doing so, they formulated a vision and identified steps to move towards it together. The conversation with the community had first explored the devotional character of community life, and it soon expanded to include the institute process and building capacity for service. An institute campaign was planned to offer training for Ruhi Books 1 and 5, and 22 of the 46 new Bahá'ís participated.

After the training, an institute coordinator from Mbuji-Mayi began to meet regularly with the friends—those trained and those still to start institute courses—to consult on possibilities for service. Soon the community grew to over 50 Bahá'ís, and the observance of Holy Days became an important aspect of community life.

The team in Tshilenge decided to celebrate the anniversary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh on 12 November—it was a new community, and the Holy Day would be a chance to celebrate. They invited 2 neighbouring communities to join them, and 160 people participated. A number of friends declared during this celebration. The friends noticed that every organized event saw new enrolments.

In addition to Book 1 and 5 training, the team encouraged the friends to study Book 2 in order to help them have conversations on spiritual themes. 26 friends started Book 2, and another Book 5 course was offered. In the meantime, home visits continued.

Not too long after this burst of energy in the cluster, the friends in Tshilenge realized that it was necessary to develop a vision of how to manage and sustain growth. A meeting was arranged for the entire community to consult about this critical matter, coinciding with the celebration of Naw-Rúz. Youth and adults came. It was understood that by engaging the parents in core activities, the community as a whole would have greater ownership over the process of growth.

India

Three friends from Kharagpur, a cluster in the state of Uttar Pradesh that has recently established an intensive programme of growth, decided to visit a neighbouring cluster, **Maharajganj**, every week to open it to the Faith and to start community-building activities. The youth conference in Lucknow lent impetus to their efforts, as 10 friends from Maharajganj participated alongside their friends from Kharagpur.

The conference inspired the group from Maharajganj to commit to starting activities in their own community. They had not yet studied any institute courses, but each made a plan to start a devotional gathering. The Auxiliary Board member and institute coordinators in Kharagpur closely accompanied this new initiative.

Out of the 10 who attended the conference in Lucknow, 6 friends from one village gathered their extended families to reflect on the concepts in Unit 2 of Ruhi Book 1, to prepare for a consultation about the importance of developing the devotional character of their community. The families began to invite their relatives, neighbours, and friends, and 8 devotional gatherings were started in 2 villages. At the same time, 2 friends from Kharagpur continued to visit weekly and contribute to the discourses in the village. Within a week, they helped form 1 junior youth group and 1 study circle in Maharajganj.

In a few months' time, some 8 friends completed study of Book 2, and intensive campaigns enabled others to study Book 3 and Book 5. This led to the formation of 4 new children's classes and 6 new junior youth groups, all initiated by local friends. When a 15-day intensive training was organized in Kharagpur, 9 people from Maharajganj attended. The newly trained friends immediately started 3 more study circles and 2 more junior youth groups. Meanwhile, regular weekly visits by the friends from Kharagpur continued.

By July, about 9 months after the youth conference, some 28 families were involved in 26 core activities, with 184 participants. As the number of activities and participants in the village increased, the need for a scheme of coordination became clear. In time, a structure to sustain and expand activities evolved naturally.

One of the friends serving as a children's class teacher was encouraged to assist other teachers, and another friend serving as an animator began to accompany others serving as animators and tutors. 5 others were asked to serve on a newly formed Cluster Growth Committee. The weekly visits of people from Kharagpur continued, supporting the efforts of local friends.

This example of continuous support inspired individuals in Maharajganj to look beyond their own village and seek opportunities to be of service in other localities. They have made plans to start activities in a neighbouring cluster, where they have some connections through family and friends. At the same time, the friends from Kharagpur will continue to support those from Maharajganj in their efforts to expand, cluster by cluster, this growing network of communities, bound together by friendship and service.

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¹ Message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

² Riqdván 2014 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

³ Message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

⁴ Message dated 23 May 2011 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

⁵ Riqdván 2010 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

⁶ Ibid.